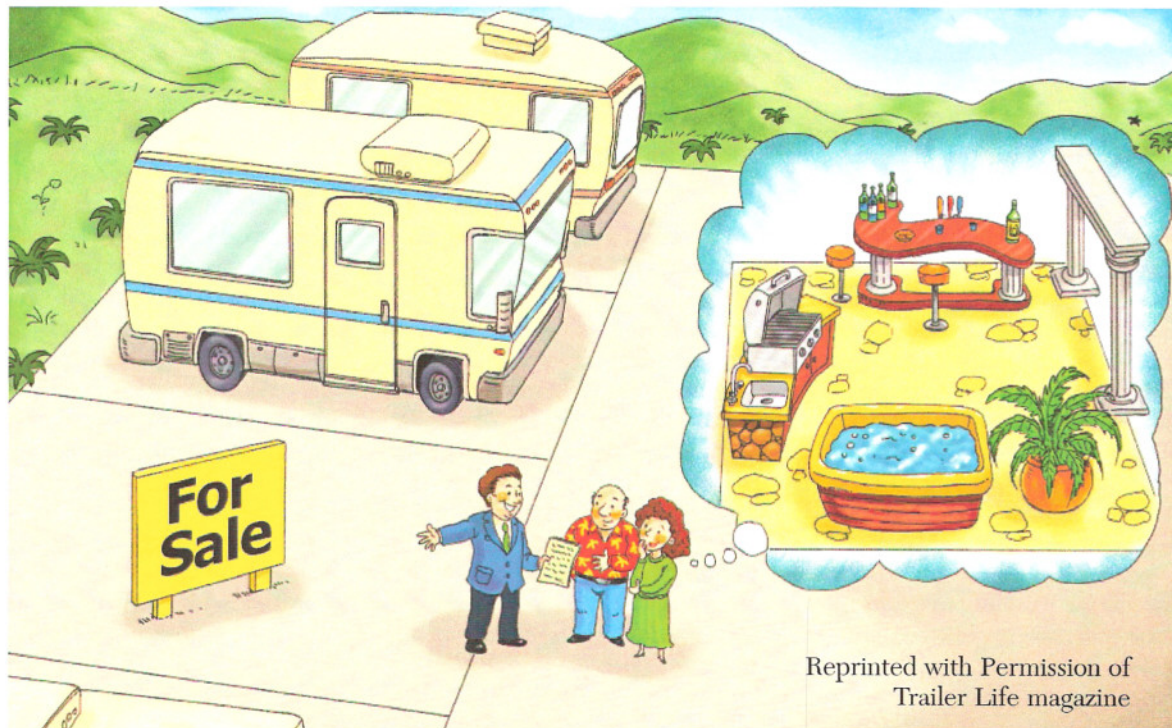


Wheel Estate



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To guarantee choice locations and stable fees, snowbirds are increasingly purchasing their own RV sites

TEXT BY JEFF CRIDER

ROCO AND JUNE SANTILLI LOVE to spend the winters in Florida in their 36-foot Newmar Mountaineer fifth-wheel. What they don't like, however, is competing with other snowbirds for premium RV sites. "The competition," 66-year-old Rocco Santilli said, "is really getting fierce."

The reasons are two-fold. For starters, there are more snowbirds than ever before. Record numbers of baby boomers have purchased RVs in recent years. Canadian snowbirds are also flocking to Florida in greater numbers, thanks to a strengthening Canadian dollar.

But while the number of Florida-bound RVers is on the rise, Florida's supply of RV sites is falling, as growing numbers of campground and RV-park owners sell their properties to developers who are paying top dollar

to convert their land into hotels, condominiums and shopping malls.

In 2005 alone, 20 Florida campgrounds were sold to developers who planned to convert these properties to other uses, said Bob Little, a board member of the Florida Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds (Florida ARVC), and owner of the 400-site Vacation Inn Resort in West Palm Beach. "Some campgrounds are resisting the urge to sell," he said, "but most of them are being offered such fantastic prices, they can't deny it."

And in the process, he said, literally thousands of RV sites are disappearing from some of Florida's most sought-after locations from Key West northward to Jacksonville and Tallahassee. In Palm Beach County alone, he said, five RV parks were sold during the past two years, taking more than 1,000 RV sites off the market.

So what's a snowbird to do?

The Santillis found a solution by simply buying an RV site at the Great Outdoors RV Resort in Titusville, on central Florida's east coast, near Cape Canaveral. "We should have done this five or six years ago," Rocco Santilli said. "The RV parks are getting fewer and fewer. And the nicer ones are getting to be even fewer than that. That's what drove us to purchase a site. It's almost impossible to get a decent site unless you own it. The Canadians basically lock sites up starting in October. If you don't have a reservation at least a year in advance, you're basically taking potluck and moving around a lot."

And that, Santilli said, is a chance many RVers are not willing to take. Indeed, many RVers have found that if they don't make their reservations early, they suffer the consequences. "You may have to take some real secondary type parks or you end up going into the middle coast," Santilli said, adding, "Most people would rather be by the coast or within a reasonable distance of the coast."

But even in Florida's interior, Santilli said, demand for RV sites has gotten to the point where many parks are now requiring two- or three-month minimum stays. That's more time than some snowbirds have available, particularly if they haven't fully retired.

State and other public parks aren't much help, either, Santilli said, because they usually have restrictions that limit how long an RVer can stay at a particular location. So for the Santillis, purchasing a site seemed like the best route to take. "We're full-time," he said. "When we go to Florida, we need to have something we can rely on."

Growing numbers of RV enthusiasts, however, are also finding that it often makes more sense financially to buy rather than rent an RV site, particularly if they can purchase a site at a resort they enjoy. Many Florida RV sites, in fact, can still be purchased for less than \$100,000.

"I think people are realizing the investment value of owning real estate," said Tom Zuidema, a campground-industry consultant who works with David Gorin & Associates of Reston, Virginia. "If I can own a piece of real estate in a park that I really like, it's not a bad deal if I do it on a seasonal basis. And if I own it, I lock in the annual costs."

Buying an RV site is also the cheapest

way for most folks to obtain a second home. "If you take a retiree or a middle-class family and they want to have an affordable vacation home, what are their options?" Zuidema asked. "Here you can buy an RV site in a nice facility that you like and put a park model on it, or a fifth-wheel or a motorhome or whatever, for a fraction of what it would cost to buy a site-built home or condo."

Park owners also see financial benefits when they convert their parks into condominium-style developments. This is because they can often generate more income if they sell each site individually than if they sold the entire campground as a whole.

Of course, part of the reason there is a shortage of campgrounds and RV parks in Florida is because developers are paying more money for these properties than park owners believe they could generate under any circumstance. However, growing numbers of park owners are converting their properties into condo-style developments rather than selling them.

Bob Little of Florida ARVC estimates that as many as 80 RV parks in Florida now offer RV sites for sale, and the numbers are rising. "Anywhere along the coastline, you're going to have RV parks that sell their sites," he said. "The property values are just soaring, and you're going to see a lot of converting."

Little speaks from experience, having developed a business helping other Florida parks convert their properties into condominium-style developments. He added that the practice of converting existing RV parks and campgrounds into resorts that sell their campsites isn't limited only to Florida. It's increasingly taking place all over the country.

"It certainly has become a trend that park owners are looking at," said David Gorin, former president and CEO of the National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds (ARVC) who now works with Zuidema, helping parks convert their facilities to condo-style developments. "Florida is certainly a very active market. [So are] Texas, New England, California, Arizona and Utah. We've got clients we've been working with in South Dakota who are looking at this."

In Texas' Rio Grande Valley, more than 70 parks have converted to condo-style developments in recent years, Zuidema said, and more have plans to do

so in the near future.

Of course, the concept of selling RV sites has been around for more than three decades, but this approach has historically only been successful with the most luxurious resorts, such as those developed by Bermuda Dunes, California-based Outdoor Resorts of America (ORA).

What's different now is that growing numbers of baby boomers are entering their prime RV-buying years, and many of them have the financial resources to purchase their own sites in these locations, thereby guaranteeing that they will have a nice place to park their rig.

All of this, of course, ups the ante for snowbirds who want to ensure that they have a place in the sun during the wintertime. Indeed, the same pressures that are making it harder for snowbirds to reserve campsites during the winter months in Florida are also driving up prices for campsites at parks that sell them.

"Five years ago, I was getting \$19,000 for my lots (at Vacation Inn Resort in West Palm Beach). Now my lots are \$85,000 to \$120,000," Little said, adding that he also charges lot owners \$150 per month in lot maintenance fees. But even that, he said, is a bargain.

"There's nowhere in Palm Beach County where you can live for \$150 a month in a gated community," he said.

It makes sense to Bob and Sharon Potere. The Michigan couple bought an RV site for their 40-foot Carriage fifth-wheel at the Vacation Inn RV Resort in the early 1990s. Then when they retired in 1998, they sold their home in Michigan and started using Vacation Inn RV Resort as their home base. They even bought a second RV site at the resort, which they now use to park their Beaver motorhome.

Sharon Potere said she and her husband like the security of having their own site and not having to compete with other snowbirds for a slice of the Florida sunshine. They also like being able to rent out their motorhome site when they're not using it.

Does it make sense for them financially? So far, the Poteres say, it does. "There are 400 sites in here," Sharon Potere said. "And I would say that at any given time there are only about 10 of them for sale." 📞